

Reflection for Sunday 22nd November (Sunday before Advent)

Bible reading:

Matthew 25.31-46

Jesus said: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Reflection.

On the surface, this passage is very simple in its message: the separation of the righteous and the unrighteous, with each of them getting what they deserve. But when we reflect a little deeper there are questions that are not so easy to address. The most obvious one is how to interpret these words in a way that recognises salvation being by grace not by works. Perhaps the actions of those who are called ‘the righteous’ in the passage are the

result of their salvation rather than the reason for it. In Luke 7:36-50 Jesus makes the point that our love of God is greater, the more we understand the how much we have been forgiven.

Both those who have been saved and those who are not express their surprise at what 'the King' says they have or have not done for him. They have encountered him in 'the least of these brothers of mine' and they were not aware of it. This made me start to think about the times we encounter Jesus in ways and places that we don't expect.

A few years ago, there was a TV comedy series called *Rev* about the ups and downs of a vicar in a London parish. At one point his ministry seems to be failing, his church may close and he is just about at the end of his tether. In a slightly irrational act he carries a cross up to the top of a local hill. He begins to sing *Lord of the Dance* and to dance a little jig. A stranger in a shellsuit carrying a half drunk can of lager joins in. Their conversation begins in a way that might suggest it isn't the stranger's first can of lager that day but then he suddenly addresses the Rev by name. 'Adam, Adam. We all have our crosses to bear. I understand Adam. I'll always be here.' Then the stranger gets up and walks away leaving Adam realising he's just encountered God.

(You can watch this clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Yo-UYCoZ9o>)

Sometimes we are aware we've encountered God; like when a stranger steps in to help just when we needed it.

Some of you will know that I help with the chaplaincy service at George Eliot hospital. I have had many encounters there that have left me thinking that I am the one who has received much more than anything I may have been able to give.

It's easy to accept that we've met with God in those kind of encounters.

But what about those situations and people in whom we are least likely to meet God? Are there situations and encounters where we don't recognise God because we didn't expect him to be there?

If you reflect back across the last week and particularly on the situations that were difficult and energy sapping, was God present? Was he there in the person that really tested your patience? Was he there in the person who seemed to you, to be thoughtless? Were those times and those encounters really opportunities to be like the people in our gospel reading who fed and clothed and visited and cared for God without realising it?

Next week marks the beginning of Advent and the start of a new church year. Perhaps a good new year's resolution would be to go looking for God in the places we least expect to find him; to be the people who love much because we know that we have been forgiven much.

Jonathan.